

2025 Proper 24C

Today's story from Genesis is one of my favorites.

Or maybe *favorite* isn't the right word...but it is one that has played such a role in my own spiritual formation that I don't think I would be here preaching before you today without it.

It's a story that has more power behind it if you listen to it as a kind of parable, rather than historic fact. It has a mythic quality to it. It tells a truth that is so profound it can't be tied to a particular time and place. It tells us something about the human condition, and how God meets us there.

If you've never had your "Jacob at the ford of the river Jabbok" moment, God bless you and count yourself fortunate. But I suspect that most of you, if you stop to reflect on it, can name a time in your life when this story resonated. A time when you found yourself wrestling with a desperate situation, and came away changed. Some of you might even be feeling that way today.

In order to understand what is going on in this story you need to know a lot of what came before. You need to know who Jacob is and how he found himself alone in the dark that night.

Jacob and his brother Esau were twins. Esau is technically the elder son (which has inheritance implications that are a thread running through their interactions with each other). Jacob is said to have been born so soon after Esau that he was holding onto his brother's heel. This isn't just some random fact about his birth. It's meant to tell us something about Jacob's character.

In that language, saying someone was 'grasping at the heel' was to call them a trickster, someone who seeks to supplant another, especially using deceit.

Basically, from the moment he was born, Jacob was labeled "Liar."

This is who he was told he was his whole life, and he lived into it. He extorted the elder son's double-portion birthright out of his brother, and then later tricked his father into giving him the all-important divine blessing first given to Abraham. He ended up fleeing his homeland, going to his mother's brother, who managed to turn the tables and trick Jacob into marrying both his daughters. His wives and concubines played games with him and each other in order to produce those all-important children. For twenty years, Jacob stayed there in his uncle's land, lying and cheating his way into prosperity, until he begins to feel threatened by his in-laws.

Why he goes back to the land of his forefathers, I don't know. Maybe he thought it was long enough, surely Esau had gotten over it by then. Maybe he thought his brother would be so impressed by everything he had accumulated—wives, concubines, children, livestock, materials goods—that he could buy his way back into his brother's good graces.

More likely Jacob was thinking of a dozen different ways to trick Esau, just like he used to.

And then, one night, Jacob receives word that his brother is coming to greet him...

...With an army of 400 men.

I have heard many interpretations of what Jacob does next. He divides his encampment into two parties, and sends them ahead of him. Some see it as an attempt to protect those dearest to him by sending the less valuable first. Some see it as some sort of clever diplomacy. Some see it as an attempt to send a message about his own power.

I see it as cowardice.

He puts everything and everyone between himself and the perceived threat. He does not want to have to face the truth about who he is and what he has done, and he will sacrifice *everything* if it keeps him safe. He'll hide on the other side of the river and watch what happens. He thinks it'll take Esau ages to work through both camps looking for him. He'll have plenty of time to run away if things take a bad turn. He'll run away with the clothes on his back, just like he had twenty years before.

That's where we pick up the story today.

Because despite all his defenses, all his careful plans, all his tricks...he is caught. Someone or something attacks him, and he is fighting for his life.

The text says that he wrestles with "a man" through the night. But who is it?

Is it Esau? Has Jacob's latest attempt to trick his brother failed? Did Esau slip past all those defenses Jacob set up?

Is it an angel? Later prophets and Torah scholars will describe it that way, probably conflating the earlier story of Jacob seeing the ladder of angels ascending to heaven.

Is it a demon? There are plenty of folk tales that describe the hero wrestling against a force of evil and prevailing. (Personally I find it a stretch to cast Jacob as a “hero.”)

This is what makes this story so timeless. So applicable to our own lives. How many times have you tried to ignore a problem, run away from it, fob it off onto someone else, only to find yourself lying awake, wrestling with it in the dark? Terrified of its immensity. Of what it could do to you.

One of the most intriguing interpretations I have heard is that Jacob was wrestling with himself. With everything he hated about himself. Furious with himself for giving in to the name he had been given. Despondent that as much as he liked to think of himself as the playful trickster, he was, in fact, a liar. He had hurt people, and now he is confronted by the hard, ugly truth about himself. He wasn't charming and clever. He was Jacob, the cheater. He had always been a cheater. He would always be a cheater.

And then the story does something unexpected. Something kind of beautiful and hopeful.

Jacob has spent the night trying to break free of the grip this thing has on him. He is trying to escape. But as the light began to rise in the east, something changed.

Suddenly, Jacob could see—maybe just a little bit at first. But he could see that he wasn't wrestling *against* an opponent who was trying to harm him.

He was wrestling with God. God who was showing him where he was weak, but also where he was strong. Showing him the Jacob he had always been, yes. But also holding up the possibility that he could be someone else.

God who had been with him at every step of this long journey, despite his tricks, and his deception, and his failings. God, the source of that blessing he had stolen from his brother. God who was still offering the chance for a blessing, if he was able to endure the struggle, the pain. A blessing that was meant for him. A blessing that came with a limp and a new name.

Israel. The one who wrestles with God and man and prevails.

Israel, which would be the name God gave to the people called out of all the nations of the earth, to be the conduit of that blessing handed down from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. A blessing that comes with a responsibility.

A name that was supposed to be a promise. Things will not always be perfect, we won't always see the moment

as filled with blessing as we think of it, but God will be there with us. Maybe not in the way we expect. Not in the way we want. God won't come along and fix everything for us. Sometimes it will feel like God is absent and we are left alone to wrestle in the dark.

But once we get through the darkest part of the night, we will see that we were never alone. God was there.

God is there.

Not as a tyrant, like that unjust judge in the parable Jesus tells. We don't have to go storm the gates of heaven to get God's attention. Prayer doesn't require a particular posture or special words. I've said this before, prayer is not a coin you drop in some divine vending machine with the expectation that if you use the right combination you'll get exactly what you want.

Sometimes prayer is just the willingness to show up, as honestly as you can be. Read the psalms—sometimes prayer is stating your sense of being wronged or overlooked or abandoned. But the very act of directing those words to...something beyond yourself, something divine, means you recognize there is something there to receive them.

That is the moment when you stop wrestling against and start clinging to the God who made you, and loves you, and blesses you. Even in the darkness.

My dear ones, Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Today, I offer to you the story of Jacob, and hope it, too, encourages you to continue to wrestle with God, to cling to God, to argue with God, to scream at God, until you reach the point when you are able to let go, to receive whatever peculiar blessing God is offering in the moment, and just rest with God.

Amen.